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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001451

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PATRIARCH URGES CONSENSUS PRESIDENTIAL
CANDIDATE

REF: BEIRUT 1442

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir told the Ambassador on 9/20 that he continues to believe in the need for a consensus presidential candidate as the only way to avoid a divided Lebanon. He agrees, however, with the need to stick to the principles outlined in the annual Bishops' statement, issued one day earlier, calling for all MPs to attend the parliamentary electoral session. Sfeir rejected Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's assertion that he was working with the Patriarch to select a presidential candidate, and lamented the fact that many in Lebanon seek the advice of neighboring countries. The Vatican is uneasy about the situation in Lebanon, he said, but expressed doubts about the effectiveness of sending a Vatican envoy to meet with Lebanese Christians MPs. End summary.

2. (SBU) The Ambassador, accompanied by DCM and Pol/Econ Chief, met with Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir at his home in Bkirki on September 20, the day after the assassination of MP Antoine Ghanem (reftel) and the issuance of the Maronite Bishops' annual statement (septel), and six days after Sfeir's return from Rome, where he met with the Pope and other Vatican officials. At the meeting's opening, the Ambassador took advantage of the presence of local press to explain that he had canceled a planned September 17 meeting with the Patriarch to avoid having the Bishops' statement appear to be the result of US lobbying. The press immediately reported the Ambassador's comments.

3. (C) The Patriarch confirmed, as reported in the press, that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri had canceled his visit to Bkirki, scheduled for September 21, though he professed not to know why or if and when it would be scheduled. The Ambassador noted that Ghanem's funeral was scheduled for the 21st.

VATICAN UNLIKELY TO HELP IN UNITING LEBANESE CHRISTIANS

14. (C) The Patriarch offered few details of his trip to Rome, other than to report the Vatican was "uneasy" about the situation in Lebanon. He expressed doubt that a Vatican envoy to Lebanon would be effective, citing the "delicacy" in reuniting Lebanese Christian MPs, divided in their various allegiances to Free Patriotic Leader General Michel Aoun, Phalange leader Amine Gemayel, and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea. "Everyone has his own position," he explained.

15. (C) The Ambassador noted that he had canceled his planned September 21 meeting with Aoun following the General's "obscene" comments suggesting the real criminal behind Ghanem's assassination was March 14. Sfeir agreed, calling Aoun "foolish" for advocating armed militias. Lebanon needs to learn from its past, he said. Aoun appeared not to have learned his lesson, the Ambassador responded.

STRONG BISHOPS' STATEMENT

16. (C) Noting that it was released only a few hours before the attack, the Ambassador commended the Patriarch for the strong Maronite Bishops' annual communique, stressing the US shared its view. Sfeir responded that the attack confirmed the Bishops' position. Noting that the press interpreted part of the statement as an attack on Hizballah, Sfeir said that armed groups acting as a state within a state would be the "ruin of the state of Lebanon."

PARLIAMENTARIANS MUST NOT BOYCOTT ELECTION

17. (C) The Patriarch agreed with the Ambassador's assertion that it is in Lebanon's interest that MPs not boycott parliament. The Bishops' statement calls on MPs to attend and equates boycotting elections with boycotting the nation.

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He said that while the opposing parties should strive to find consensus, it should not be come at the expense of the principles outlined therein. The Ambassador added that, in his personal view, allowing Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri to decide who is an acceptable candidate sets a bad precedent. Publicly the US would continue to support the Speaker's efforts to resolve the crisis, although in three years Berri had yet to play a constructive role in promoting democracy in Lebanon.

18. (C) Sfeir objected to Berri's assertion that he was working with the Patriarch to select a president, complaining that he had referenced Lebanese law many times to refute this claim. However, no one listened to him. He confirmed that Berri had not sought his advice in 1998 when President Lahoud was elected.

ONLY CONSENSUS CANDIDATE WILL KEEP LEBANON UNITED

19. (C) The Patriarch advocated a compromise candidate rather than one from either the March 14 majority or March 8 opposition, who would be opposed by the other camp. The Ambassador noted that the Bishops' statement was stronger, calling for a candidate who would "unite" the country. Sfeir agreed, but maintained that only a nonpartisan compromise candidate could do so. He agreed, however, with the need for a strong president able to rise above party politics and make his own decisions. The Ambassador responded that Berri's game seems to aim for a weak president.

110. (C) The Ambassador suggested that the opposition's claim to having only one candidate -- Aoun -- was a ploy to promote the candidacies of stealth March 8 candidates, like Lebanese Armed Forces Commander General Michel Sleiman, who profess to be neutral. Sfeir responded that Aoun himself claimed to be neutral. The DCM noted that the Bishops' statement refrained from citing names, focusing instead on what is good for the

state. This, he suggested, would be a good message to send Berri, to which the Patriarch agreed. The Ambassador added that Berri needs to understand the importance of a strong president; if weak, the immediate presidential crisis would be solved, but the longer-term political issues would remain. The Bishops' statement was about more than just the presidential election, he said.

CASUALTY OF OPPOSITION'S THREATS OF IMPENDING CHAOS

¶11. (C) After repeating his call for a consensus candidate several more times, the usually reserved Patriarch suddenly became more animated, saying the Maronites were "in fear" that the country was headed toward "two presidents, two governments, two Lebanons." This would be a disaster, he stressed, therefore the church was trying to ensure only one president is elected. Unfortunately, he added, in one of his more forthcoming remarks, "Many in Lebanon seek the advice of our neighbors."

¶12. (C) In response to the DCM's question on whether/how the Patriarch would support two presidents at the same time, Sfeir said it was not an acceptable outcome, but even if he states this, no one will listen. The Ambassador objected, noting that people paid attention to the Bishops' statement, as shown by the number of phone calls he received immediately following its release. A strong statement like that is hard to ignore, he reasoned. Although the US was not in the business of interpreting Lebanon's constitution, if the choice boiled down to a president elected by absolute majority versus a vacuum or Syrian-imposed candidate, the US would side with the candidate who embodied the principles outlined in the statement.

¶13. (C) The Patriarch again protested, arguing that if March 14 elects a president using an absolute majority, others will accuse it of violating the constitution, justifying their right to do the same by electing a second president. The Ambassador responded that there are enough candidates to avoid a March 14 - March 8 split. Berri wants to tell voters he has the Patriarch's support, therefore Sfeir should insist to him that his deputies make quorum, the Ambassador suggested, adding that the shock of Ghanem's assassination

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might help push them in this direction.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) It is clear that the opposition's allusions to a second government scenario have struck fear in the heart of the aging Patriarch. His comment on the advisory role of Lebanon's neighbors was an obvious reference to Syria. Unfortunately, the opposition's strategy of threatening chaos should March 14 elect a president via absolute majority seem to have succeeded in this critical case.

¶15. (C) The Bishops' statement remains our best bet; if the Patriarch sticks to its message and avoids giving the appearance of objecting to an absolute majority vote, it would counter Berri's maneuvering. Berri will find it hard to object to a clear call by the Patriarch, echoing the Bishops' statement, for all MPs to vote. But as the old sage notes, Berri answers to other (more influential) advisors, and we fully expect he will find a way around the momentary setback inflicted by the Bishops' statement.

FELTMAN